

Planning Studies

Narrative

Fort Myers Riverfront Development Plan

Fort Myers CRA

The 2009 Fort Myers Riverfront Development Plan was created cohesively with the existing 2003 Downtown Master Plan as the final piece of the puzzle in redeveloping the core of Fort Myers, Florida. In order to mine all the facets of Fort Myers' historic waterfront, building upon the greater Downtown Master Plan was crucial.

To explain the importance of the Fort Myers Riverfront Development Plan to the City of Fort Myers, it is necessary to understand the progression of the all-encompassing plans that preceded it. Successful redevelopment of a slum or blighted area requires preparing a Master Plan involving extensive public input and stakeholder "buy-in"; creating a long-term, yet attainable, vision for the future; and setting forth key action steps necessary to achieve that vision. Master Plans must also be reviewed annually—and updated periodically—to accommodate changing market conditions, to reflect environmental, life safety and building code amendments, and to acknowledge accomplishments that allow the community to move on to new projects. The Fort Myers Community Redevelopment Agency (CRA) adheres to and embraces these principles, as demonstrated by the completion of our third Master Plan update since the inception of the Agency in 1984.

The first modern day Fort Myers Downtown Master Plan was prepared by BRW, Inc., and adopted by City Council in 1986. Over the next 14 years, over 75% of the plan's recommendations were accomplished, so in 2001, an updated Master Plan was commissioned. That update was completed by Duany Plater-Zyberk and Company in 2002, and was formally adopted by City Council in 2003. By 2009, over \$500 million in new private investment had occurred and a substantial number of the 2003 Master Plan's objectives had been achieved. As the crash of the housing and commercial real estate markets brought new private development to a standstill, the CRA shifted its focus from expanding the downtown residential base to developing the largely vacant riverfront.

The development concepts proposed in the 2003 Master Plan for the riverfront included hotels, retail shops, restaurants, an expanded convention facility and extensive public open space. In order to transform this concept into reality, a more detailed Riverfront Development Plan—backed up by market studies and a financial feasibility analysis—was needed. To develop the Plan, the CRA issued a unique Request for Qualifications (RFQ) for a planning and design team led by a developer with experience in public/private partnerships. The team selected was comprised of an array of accomplished specialists, including a developer experienced in public/private partnerships, Acquest Realty Advisors/Acquest Development, Inc.; retail consultants Boorn Partners; architects Populous and Parker Mudgett Smith; landscape architects Johnson Engineering, JJR; hotel consultant HVS; and retail market analyst Downtown Works. The planning team completed their development plan for the 7-block by 2-block riverfront area in the fall of 2009, which was adopted by City Council in April 2010 (see Appendix A: Tab 2 of the printed 2010 Downtown Plan or page 67 of the electronic 2010 Downtown Plan). The Riverfront Development Plan was also incorporated into the 2003 Master Plan, with the combined documents becoming the 2010 Downtown Plan (see Appendix A). By uniting the two plans, the continuity of the vision created by earlier planning efforts was insured. The Riverfront Development Plan also allowed the CRA to seamlessly transition into the

implementation phase since it was supported by feasibility studies, cost estimates, funding sources and a phasing schedule.

Innovation – The CRA incorporated several innovative concepts into both the riverfront planning process and in the Plan itself.

- The RFQ, which followed the Competitive Contract Negotiations Act process, restricted the managing partner of the team to be a developer rather than a planner or architect. The purpose of this condition was to allow the developer to do what they specifically found necessary to create a workable plan through selecting their own team and partnering with whatever other firms and disciplines would be required. In their submittal, the developer was to include the sub-consultants they wanted to use to prepare the development plan and to demonstrate its market and financial feasibility.
- The RFQ stipulated two phases. The first phase required preparing a Riverfront Development Plan for the riverfront that addressed planning, design, financial feasibility, detailed cost estimates and potential fund sources. Following successful adoption of the Plan, the second phase included a development contract with the selected developer to implement all or portions of the approved Plan. The CRA felt that it was more efficient to select a qualified developer and allow them to work closely with the City to create and implement a workable, financially-feasible plan, than to prepare a plan and try to find a developer to implement it.
- The most innovative and unique feature of the adopted Plan is the proposal to create a 1.5 acre water detention basin in the heart of the historic downtown River District. The fully sea-walled detention basin, designed in cooperation with the South Florida Water Management District, will improve the quality of the storm water run-off into the Caloosahatchee River (an impaired water body) and reduce the Total Maximum Daily Loading (TMDL) by incorporating a filtering system, aerating fountains, oil/water separation, and a littoral planting shelf. The detention basin will also create additional waterfront property for hotel, retail and restaurant development; provide storm water mitigation for 15 acres of vacant riverfront property; and symbolically return a portion of the riverfront to its historic shoreline, which is currently two blocks south of the present day riverfront. This urban-style detention basin can be replicated in other cities that are dealing with water quality issues and the incongruity of pedestrian-friendly urban design and on-site water management swales and structures.

Impact on the Community – The creative design concepts included in the Plan will have a substantial impact on the community.

- The water detention basin will create nearly 1,500 linear feet of additional waterfront property, resulting in higher property values and increased revenue for the CRA district.
- The waterfront property will be more marketable to retail, restaurant and hotel developers, resulting in higher lease rates or sale prices.
- The 15-foot wide walkways, pedestrian plazas and other public open spaces surrounding the water basin will become a gathering place for local residents and tourists and will create an attractive venue for special events and festivals.
- The economic impact analysis illustrates that the proposed development will create \$376 million in construction spending and result in over 3,000 construction jobs, as well as generating \$76 million in annual expenditures that will originate nearly 800 annual jobs.
- The Plan successfully integrates the historic downtown core area and the riverfront by focusing the proposed new development in the blocks immediately adjacent to the historic district while keeping the riverfront as largely public open space.

Funding – A variety of funding sources and partnerships has been identified for the implementation of the Plan.

- The CRA has earmarked \$2.4 million in surplus TIF-backed streetscape improvement bond funds (the completed streetscape project came in under budget) for the first phase water detention basin.
- The water basin project has been awarded a \$389,000 Florida Department of Environmental Protection (DEP) grant and a \$500,000 grant from the State of Florida.
- A \$250,000 National Endowment of the Arts (NEA) “Our Town” grant and a \$200,000 Urban Trails grant have been submitted for consideration. Both of these grant applications resulted in partnerships with local arts organizations, historic preservation groups, and a children’s museum.
- The City worked with the Lee County Office of Economic Development to extend the Enterprise Zone to include the riverfront.
- The City Brownfield Committee designated the riverfront a Brownfield Area.
- The CRA is seeking New Market Tax Credits to incentivize the proposed hotel development.
- The EB-5 Program is being investigated to assist in the assembly of equity for the hotel development.

Problem Solving – Development of the riverfront posed several challenges that the Plan had to creatively address. The riverfront area is included in a historic district, the riverfront land is in a Coastal High Hazard Zone and is 4-5 feet below the FEMA and Water Management District required 10 foot Finished Floor Elevation (FFE), the quality of the storm water runoff has to be improved and both public and private property are included in the Plan area. The planning team addressed these issues in the following manner.

- The City Public Works Director, the CRA Director, and the project designer and engineer worked very closely with the South Florida Water Management District to design an urban water detention basin that would improve the quality of the storm water runoff, mitigate up to 15 acres of potentially developable riverfront land, create opportunities for adjacent commercial development and provide an attractive public open space.
- The design team has also reached an agreement with the Water Management District staff for a variance from the 10 foot FFE to allow up to 2.5 feet of flood-proofing. This was critical to the success of attracting retail and restaurants to the riverfront which would otherwise be required to be elevated 4-5 feet above the existing grades. A 1.5 – 2 foot elevation is more manageable and pedestrian friendly than a 4-5 foot one.

Applicability to Other Communities

- Communities that would like to move seamlessly from the planning to the construction phase could benefit from the approach Fort Myers took in requesting a developer-led planning team. This approach works especially well if the plan will include specific public or public/private projects that the community is prepared to construct.
- The urban-designed, multi-functional water detention basin is another feature that could be replicated by other communities. The mitigation credits available from constructing a central detention basin can be used as an incentive to stimulate new development or sold to recoup the expense of installing the basin.